

Mississippi Narratives

Prepared by

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For the State of Mississippi

Jake Dawkins

"Uncle Jake", as he is familiarly known to his many black and white friends, is a recognized conversationalist. He is never at loss for a word or for a tale and of all his favorite topics for discussion he declares that none pleases him so much as telling about slavery times and about his experiences with ghosts.

The years have treated Uncle Jake kindly. He is still able to hoe a neat row in the garden and takes pride in showing off the flowers in the yards of his white folks that he has kept so spic and span. His 92 years, that he so proudly boasts of, have touched lightly and his straight back and broad shoulders, drooping only a little at times, would be the pride of many men forty years his junior. In his stocking feet he measures five feet six inches and the last time he weighed he topped the scales at 160 pounds. One can easily picture him as a fat black buck who, in his prime, could hoe a row of cotton in record time. His white nappy head alone betrays his age.

Upon walking into the neat cabin in which Uncle Jake makes his home with his daughter, Maria, any visitor is cheerfully welcomed and told to come and take a chair and sit a spell. Flowers bloom in profusion around the shanty which they call home and inside the walls are brightened with gay colored funny papers tacked over its entirety. Uncle Jake responds quickly to any question which will place him in the spotlight.

"Yes, sir, Mistress, old man Bookers wife told me you was trying to see all us slavery time niggers and I been a looking for you every day. Well, I tell you, me and Marse Lige, dat was Miss Emily's boy, was one

years chillen and he tell me dat us was born in eighteen and forty five, so dat would throw me being 'bout 92 years old wouldn't it? Ain't many folks 'round black or white dat is as old as I is. My first marster was old Joe Mays but he give us all to his daughter, Miss Emily. He lived at Athens and dat was de time when it was de county seat and dey had a jail and big courts and everything. Miss Emily's husband was a Dawkins but she done most of de bossin' even 'fore he died, she and her paw, he lived wid them."

"My mammy and pappy was name Adeline and Jim Dawkins and dey come from de Carolina's. My mammy told me dat when Marse Joe bought her, he paid five hundred dollars for her when she was put up on de auction block and sold."

"Miss Emily had four boys and six girls. I woan nothin' but a little fellow durin' most of slavery and me and my three brothers and sisters useter play wid de white chillen all de time. Lemme see, we useter play hide de switch and bugger bear. I never liked dat bugger bear game cause I was right scary and when de one dat was it would put smut or red berries on dey face I'd run and hide and wouldn't come back til my mammy come after me. One night dey didn't find me til after dark and my mammy sho' wore me out."

"We never had much chance to go to church durin' slavery times. De ole marster wouldn't low de niggers to have no meetin's on his place. Some of de older folks would slip off some times and go over to Gen'ral Davis' place dat was next to ours. Dey had big meetin's there. The only time I 'member going to a meetin' was when de marster took all de slaves over to de white folks church at New Hope and had a white preacher to preach to us. But Lawd, he never did much preachin'. His text was, "Obey your marster and mistress", and he never told us a word about savin' our souls from hell fire and damnation. Sometime when some of de niggers slip off to meetin's de paterollers would cotch dem and give dem thirty nine lashes wid dey whips. De paterollers was a bunch of de meanest overseers from all de plantations round."

"We had lots of young marryin's in dose days. Old marster would get a boy and a gal dat had been walkin' together and tell 'em he's gwineter marry dem. He take a paper and read some stuff off of it and den say, "Nigger, jump de broom!" And he'd make dem both jump over a broom and den say dey was married. Dat's de reason so many of de colored folks dat had been livin' together for a long time was married again after Surrender by a preacher. Dey might not a had much sense but dey knowed dat woan no right way to get married."

"Old marster like fiddlin' and dancin' and dat was one thing he lowed de niggers on his place to do. We'd have a big time til he'd go and get drunk and tell de overseer to whip everybody."

"De onliest whippin's I ever got was from de mistress and from my mammy and dey was allus 'bout fightin'. Miss Emily'd told all us chillen dat she didn't want none of us to never tell a lie and dat she was gwinter whip us if we did. Whenever we's playin' and some of de other kids would say I was tellin' a story I'd jump on dem and start a fight and when Miss Emily'd come out to stop us and would start to whip us for fightin', I'd tell her I fit cause somebody called me a lie and I ain't never tell a lie cause she don't low dat. Den she don't whip me so hard and sorter smile like at me. She was a good woman and allus was bringin' de chillen somethin' on Christmas, like candy and apples. She wouldn't low her daddy to whip us either."

"When de war started I was a workin' in de field but Miss Emily took all de niggers to town to see Marse Lige go off to war. We went round to de place where dey was drillin', it was where Judge Acker has his garden now, and I guess there was a million soldiers there. Marse Lige's colonel was name Gaines, I think. We had a right hard time after dat cause de Yankees come thru and took all de stock, dey stole Miss Emily's silver and took her money she had hid and den took all de nigger mens cepten my daddy and another old man what was too old to go. De womens and us boys had to finish de crop dat year. Bout two years after dat dey brung young marster home wid a bullet in his shoulder and dey thought for a long time he might die. Miss Marthe, dat was his sister, she lost her mind worryin' bout him and she went plum crazy and from den til she died dey had to keep somebody lookin' after her all de time, cause she was sho' crazier dan a betsy bug!"

"Old marster was too old to go to de war so he stayed home wid us. He kept de road to Aberdeen hot tho' to de saloon to get his whiskey and he stayed drunk most of de time. Fact was, he was drunk when Surrender came and he call us to de house and us not knowin' whether we's gwinter get whipped or what and he say, "Niggers, I hates to tell you but you is as free as I is." We all shouted, "Thank Gawd A'mighty, we's free at last." Dat's where dey got dat church song dey sing now dat goes like dat."

"We stayed on and helped Miss Emily that year and farmed third and fourth with her, you know de niggers get a third of de corn and a fourth of de cotton. My mammy and us chillen, my paw was dead den, cleared 'bout a bale of cotton and two loads of corn dat year. We moved to de Carlisle place de next year and stayed there for a right smart while."

"I never married til I was 'bout thirty cause my mammy made such a racket 'bout leavin her. Why I member once when I was 'bout twenty I walked with a girl one Sunday and when I come home Mammy made me take off all my clothes and she wore me out. I is married three times but all my wives is dead now and I lives here with my daughter, Maria. She is mighty good to me and we is good Christians. I jined de church 'bout two years after de Surrender and I is been a faithful member ever since."

"Ghost'es? Why, cose I believes in dem. Why, don't de good book teach dat dere is two kinds of sperrits, de evil and de good? And don't it say dat de sperrit is allus with you? Cose it does. One time when I was

on de way to church I step aside to let one by me. Annie, she was my wife then, she didn't have much faith in ghostes. She asked me what I was steppin' side for and I told her and she laughed at me. But I did see him and he was a big fellow without no head and with a white bosom. They won't bother you lessen you get in de way and lessen you do somethin' wrong. You know how I tells if I is gwinter meet one? I feels de warm streak of steam in de air. You member old man Burg don't you? He useter have a big mill and I worked for him and I was with him when he died, fact was he died wid his head in my hand. Why I see him most every week, as plain as day. Ghostes can't talk but I sho' wish they could for I'd like to talk to dat man."

"I sho' would hate to meet old marster on one of dese dark nights and him drunk, I'se talkin' bout his ghost. I'd sho' strike it out for de biggest stream of water in de country and get across as fast as I could cause you know, ghostes can't cross water."